DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 048 810 24 FL 002 166

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TITLE The University Classics Department and the Secondary-School Latin Crisis.
PUB DATE Apr 71
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Classical Association of the Atlantic States Convention, Baltimore, Md., April 24, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Classical Languages, *College High School Cooperation, *College Language Programs, Curriculum Development, Enrollment Trends, Greek, Language Instruction, *Latin, *Relevance (Education), Student Attitudes, Student Interests, Student Motivation, Student Needs

ABSTRACT

The decline in enrollment in classical studies programs leads to the consideration of possible causes and to the proposal of ways to improve existing courses at the university level. Changing social values and interests are found to be at the source of student discontent. Resultant improvements from a high school and college cooperative curriculum improvement program are discussed. (RL)

ED048810

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OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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THE UNIVERSITY CLASSICS DEPARTMENT and the SECONDARY-SCHOOL LATIN CRISIS

(A paper read at the CAAS convention in Baltimore on April 24)

Although I am responsible for it, this title is inappropriate. In the first place, the crisis is universal and not just in the secondary schools. In the second place, the title seems to imply, incorrectly, that all assistance must flow in one direction--from the university to the high school. In the third place, the title fails to view the crisis in Classics within the general crisis in education. As a matter of fact, the helpless floundering of school boards, administrators, teachers and parents in dealing with young people reflects a larger, all-encompassing crisis in the nation. The crisis in Classics cannot then be examined in isolation, nor can it be resolved in the high school by enlivening the fifth declension with slides of Pompeii or in college by packing a classroom with a single, sure-fire course in mythology to appease a harassed dean mumbling about poor departmental faculty-student ratios.

The crisis is general, and Americans are bewildered. But the very bewilderment both of our leaders and of the public poses Classicists with a special challenge. In previous periods of social dislocation, when old values had been rejected and there seemed no going on in the world the way it was, men looked back and re-explored the Classical experience for guidance in evolving new values and fresh perspectives--in the Renaissance and the eighteenth century, for example, and particularly at the birth of the American republic.

Can we Classicists now help promote such a productive re-exploration of

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the Classical heritage?

Unfortunately, a degree in Classics or the title of Latin teacher or Classics professor does not automatically presuppose a serious commitment to social responsibility or to a dynamic application of the best in the Classical legacy. How many of us can confidently assert that in our own classrooms, we are consciously stimulating a clarification of values and of social purpose through a study of the Classics?

Of course this question will provoke some to cry, "Who is this man? What arrogance to confront Classicists with such a pompous challenge!"

But is this challenge really beyond the reach of dedicated Classicists? Ask Judith LeBovit or Rudy Masciantonio about the profound re-examination of philosophy, goals and methodology and imaginative innovations in the school systems of Washington and Philadelphia. They will not reply by speaking about new techniques for teaching irregular verbs nor with an article for publication in most of our scholarly journals. No, they will speak first about the social and cultural crises in their cities.

How many university Classics departments take so seriously this profoundest implication of our Classical legacy? How many have attempted fundamental re-examinations of their programs, analyzed in department meetings their philosophy and goals and evaluated individual courses in terms of the demands of the '70s?

Progressive secondary school teachers reject outmoded conceptions of their discipline.

They know that Latin taught for its own sake, in isolation, is doomed, that Latin cannot be saved by any clever devices; but they also know that Latin is not synonymous with Classics. For them the critical

question is whether the young people in their classes are to enjoy a stimulating and enriching exposure to the best in the Classical experience. They reject an élitist approach to our discipline, the fountainhead of the humanities, and embrace eagerly their responsibility to help reinvigorate in our beleaguered society the humanistic stream in our heritage.

It is apparent how provocative the new ferment in the secondary schools can be for the universities, for how many university professors can claim an enlightenment about the Classics equal to that exhibited by these progressive high school teachers?

It is my contention that the university Classics departments must begin to learn from the high-school Latin teachers. In more than four years of cooperation with high school teachers in attempts to develop more vigorous Classics programs, I have obtained a series of stimulating new ideas.

Brock University has indeed the advantages of being young (seven years old) and small (2,000 students). It is not hidebound. When I was invited to organize a Classics Department six years ago, I was given a free hand. I immediately established contact ~~first~~ with the local Latin teachers and then with the teachers throughout the province of Ontario. My purpose, admittedly, was to promote our enrolment in Classics at Brock. I soon realized, however, that my association and discussions with the Latin teachers at our monthly workshops and annual summer institutes were certainly of as much value to me as to them. Now I can only list a few of the concepts and ideas I obtained.

1. As I followed the teachers' slow and painful struggle over the years toward the realization that their traditional Latin program had no

future and that they had to develop a new set of objectives, I realized how decisive it is for a successful Classics program to clarify philosophy and objectives. From the start ours had not been a traditional department of Classical languages and literature, but what precisely did we mean by a department of Classical humanism? Today, although the commitment and clarity of members of the department varies, we accept two general objectives in our program:

a. to expose students to varied aspects of the Classical world so as to enable them through comparisons and contrasts to achieve richer insights into the modern world;

b. to stimulate the students to examine their own values and ideals through exposing them to such aspects of Classical humanism as the examined life, the life of deliberate choice, the ideal of excellence, the exploitation of one's capacities, the difference between knowledge and opinion, and the appreciation of the wonderful variety in human experience and of the joy of intellectual discovery.

For the achievement of the first objective, richer insights into the modern world, the Classicist, it seems to me, must take a stand in keeping with the best traditions of the ancient world against war, for human dignity, for free inquiry, for a society that allows for the exploitation of all one's capacities. I do not see how one can teach Book XXIV of the Iliad or the Aeneid and support the Viet Nam War. For the achievement of the second objective, the clarification of personal values, the students must see the teacher using the Classics to investigate his own life and be inspired to do the same.

2. From discussions and demonstrations of classroom techniques and methods at our workshops and institutes, I have become more sensitive to my own classroom performance. I have recognized, too, the need to experiment with more efficient methods of teaching the ancient languages. We have abdoned prose composition and de-emphasized translation.

3. From investigations of materials for enriching the high-school Latin class, I have become more aware of the need for inter-disciplinary approaches to our own courses and have enlisted the cooperation of colleagues in other departments to provide our students with a fuller experience with antiquity. Like the high-school Latin program, our program is becoming less and less oriented to language and literature alone.

4. Have become aware of the areas where Latin teachers feel least well-prepared, we have tailored our own program to meet the needs of future Latin teachers and are projecting a graduate program geared to preparing the present Latin teachers for new courses they are being called upon to teach.

Thus, inspired by interaction with high-school teachers, we have sought to enrich the content of our program, to improve the quality of our classroom teaching and methods and to adjust our course offerings to meet current needs.

I am sure that high school teachers are pleased to hear a university professor admit to gaining so much from working with them, but they would also like to hear what a university professor might do for them. It is obvious that they want assistance in developing syllabi for new courses and new educational materials , and they would like evening or summer courses adapted to their immediate needs

But these contributions are not key. Latin teachers feel isolated; they are frightened and demoralized. I think that our greatest achievement at Brock is that the Latin teachers of Ontario know that the Classics Department at one university in the province cares. The Brock workshops and institutes belong to them, and they help to plan them. They feel free to write letters with questions or with reports of their success and to bring their classes to spend a day with us. When they write, they know they will receive an immediate reply. When they visit, they are at home. Brock is where they meet each other, discuss their problems, work out solutions, receive help and encouragement. We, in turn, accept their problems as our problems and try to help them maintain their enrolments. The Junior Classical League of Ontario was organized at Brock and holds its annual convention at Brock. In May outstanding Latin students from all over Ontario are rewarded by an invitation to spend a weekend with Classics at Brock.

Our students share our enthusiasm in the crusade in defense of Classics. Some teach Greek on Saturday mornings to high school students. This year five of them conducted Saturday-morning classes for elementary school children, using Rudy Masciantonio's fifth-grade Philadelphia syllabus. Brock students deliver slide lectures in high schools and have been invited as far as three hundred miles away.

In these activities Classics becomes a way of life for them. The Classics Club receives the largest budget appropriation from the Student Union, after the ski club, because it is the most active. Our students put on a Greek tragedy in Greek every year, and in a first-class performance.

Thus the enthusiasm engendered by our cooperation with the high schools infects our students and helps to account for our having almost thirty undergraduate majors out of 2,000 students and for our having approximately ten per cent of the student body enrolled in at least one Classics course.

In conclusion, what do we need, all of us, on all levels?

We need, I think, what John XXIII called an aggiornamento, a bringing-up-to-date of our discipline for the exploitation of its full potential. For such an aggiornamento we must be prepared for a bold jettisoning of outmoded baggage, all the ingrained, unproductive preconceptions and pretensions about Classics. Our task is to mobilize the energies and imaginations of thousands of Classicists dedicated to the Classical ideal of excellence and the Roman ideal of service to humanity. What a contribution we could make in helping to redefine our nation's goals for the achievement of a more humane society, a better America and a better world.